La Figlia Che Piange

POEM TEXT

O quam te memorem virgo...

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—
Lean on a garden urn—
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair—
Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left
As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
As the mind deserts the body it has used.
I should find
Some way incomparably light and deft,
Some way we both should understand,
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.
And I wonder how they should have been together!
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

SUMMARY

Oh, what should I call you, maiden?

Pose on the top step of the paved staircase. Lean against a decorative garden vase. Let the sun filter through your hair. Clutch your bouquet tight, looking shocked and hurt, then throw it aside and turn away with a fleeting look of bitterness. But keep letting the sun filter through your hair.

That's how I would have wanted her lover (me) to leave her. That's how I would have wanted her to stand around, mourning. That's how he would have deserted her: the way a soul leaves a wounded corpse, the way a mind leaves a body it's been using. I would want to find some exceptionally slick and artful exit—something we could agree on, as easy and dishonest as a grin and a handshake.

She turned from me, but like the fall weather, she captivated my mind long afterward, with her flowing hair and the bouquet in her arms. I still wonder how that couple (me and her) would have worked out! I wouldn't have the same stance and attitude as I do now. Occasionally, these thoughts still stop and disturb me, in the middle of the night or during my midday break.

THEMES

LOVE, HEARTBREAK, AND REGRET

"La Figlia Che Piange" (Italian for "the girl who weeps") deals with the lingering pain and confusion of a romantic breakup. The speaker, who has left his lover, reimagines and reframes his "desert[ion]" in various ways—even critiquing himself in the third person—as if trying to gain imaginative control over a painful experience. Despite his efforts, his lover's memory still "Compel[s]" his "imagination," plaguing him with some combination of guilt, desire, and regret. Through the speaker's internal conflict, the poem illustrates how the end of a romance can haunt lovers long afterward—especially, perhaps, the lover who called things off.

The speaker tries various ways of coming to grips with the breakup, and with his role in it, but none seem to satisfy him. He shifts between second and third person when referring to the young woman, and third and first person when referring to himself. First, he addresses the remembered lover as if giving her stage directions, trying to arrange the perfect version of the breakup scene; then he critiques both her and himself in the third person, saying how he *wishes* they'd behaved. He also toggles between past and present tense, at one point musing that "I should find" some better "way" to leave her. It's as if the scene is still replaying in his mind, long after the event, and he's still irrationally holding out hope that he can get it right.

His internal conflict points to lingering doubt or guilt over the breakup, as well as a lingering attachment to the girl herself. He describes the girl's "pained surprise" at his rejection, and the "fugitive resentment" (fleeting bitterness) in her eyes as she "turn[ed]" away from him. Evidently, he hurt her, and they didn't part as friends. But "fugitive" may suggest that she wasn't *that* hurt, and moved on quickly—in the speaker's judgement, at least. However, the speaker also compares the way he "left" her to the way the mind or soul "deserts the body it has used," leaving "the body torn and bruised." This suggests that he took

advantage of her emotionally ("used" her) and hurt her deeply as a result. He wishes, sarcastically, that he had found (could still find?) some smoother "way" to leave her: some "light and deft" exit that would be "Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand." His self-mocking tone implies that even *he* thinks he's cowardly and glib, never mind what *she* thinks. On top of all his guilt, he still seems attracted to her: he's dwelled on her memory for "many days" and "hours" since their parting.

Though the speaker rationalizes the breakup, he's clearly still haunted by it in the end. No matter how he reframes or justifies such moments, the poem suggests, they'll still return to "trouble[]" him long after the fact. He reports that the memory of her beauty (her "hair," "flowers," etc.) "Compelled [his] imagination" for a long time after the breakup. Then he switches back to present tense and the distancing third person, as if to prove he's still not over her: "I wonder how they should have been together!" He struggles to find a silver lining, claiming that he would have "lost a gesture and a pose" if they'd stayed together. In other words, his personality would have turned out differently, and he might not have developed into the artist he is.

But even this justification makes him sound glib, like a "pose[r]." Finally, he admits that "these cogitations," or thoughts, "Sometimes" return to him in dreams and daydreams (during "the troubled midnight and the noon's repose"). The word "cogitations" is almost absurdly pompous, suggesting that he's intellectualizing his painful situation as a defense mechanism. His mind keeps trying to find some detached perspective on the breakup, but his heart (or unconscious mind) remains "troubled"—and probably always will.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-24

EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT VS. AESTHETIC DETACHMENT

The speaker of "La Figlia Che Piange" presents himself as a fussy aesthete, someone who cares more about getting his breakup *right*—making it a successful gesture or beautiful scene—than about the pain of the breakup itself. Indeed, he suggests that the breakup was worth it because it gave him a tragic "pose" he could incorporate into his personality and art. But his true feelings show through this detached pose, suggesting that no poetic language or artistic "gesture[s]" can heal the deepest emotional wounds. Moreover, the poem suggests, people can't be the art directors of their own lives—they have to live them, and they don't always work out as satisfyingly as art.

From the outset, the speaker comes off as a fastidious artist type, trying to arrange his memories and emotions just so. The poem begins with an epigraph from Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid*, which translates to "Oh, what should I call you, maiden?" Among other things, this allusion suggests that the speaker (or poet) imagines his failed romance in literary terms. In wrestling with his feelings about an ex, he casts himself as the mythical hero Aeneas addressing Venus, the goddess of love. At first, he tries to *pose* his ex like a model or mannequin in his imagination. Later, he claims that "a gesture and a pose"— an artistic personality or literary attitude—is what he gained from the breakup. (Basically, he's suggesting that staying with her would have been bad for his art.) In both instances, he's trying to replace an awkward, painful reality with a pleasing "pose." It's easier to pretend that the breakup made her look beautiful, and made him a better artist, than to acknowledge how hurtful it was.

Meanwhile, "I should find" suggests that the speaker is still trying to imagine what the perfect breakup *would* have been, long after the moment has passed. The grammar here is ambiguous—"I should find" might mean "I would find [if I could]" or "I ought to find"—and the ambiguity suggests the speaker is still wrestling with his level of responsibility. It's here that he finally steps into the active role of "I" and stops referring to "him." Yet he continues to distance himself from his emotional turmoil, speaking as though he were staging a scene and could find some different "way" of doing it. He claims that his preferred "way" of parting would be "incomparably light and deft," "Simple and faithless": in other words, as slick and unemotional as possible. If he's accusing himself here, he's doing so from behind a shield of irony rather than plainly confessing his guilt and regret.

Despite all these layers of ironic self-dramatization, the speaker can't remain coolly detached. His "pose" won't bring the girl back or ease his conscience; by extension, no amount of artistry or irony will defeat real-life pain. There's something absurd about his attempts to stage-direct the girl in his imagination: she's long gone, and probably wouldn't listen to him anyway!

The effort at gaining some artistic power over her ultimately seems desperate and sad. The way she haunts his "imagination" may have given him a few beautiful lines or images, such as the image of "Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers." But emotionally, it's just not enough: he "wonder[s]" how their romance would have turned out if he'd chosen love over art, or love over mere emotional "gesture[s]" and "pose[s]." Indeed, the thought of her still "amaze[s]" him sometimes, as if leaving him at a loss for words. In the end, all artistic gestures—including the poem we're reading—seem to pale beside real love and pain.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-3

O quam te memorem virgo...
Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—
Lean on a garden urn—
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair—

The poem begins with an epigraph from the *Aeneid*, an epic poem by the ancient Roman poet Virgil. The Latin quotation translates to, "Oh, what should I call you, maiden?" (or "Oh, by what name should I call you, virgin?"). Aeneas, the poem's hero, asks this question of the love-goddess Venus, who has appeared to him disguised as a huntress. Together with the Italian title, which translates to "the girl who weeps," the epigraph suggests that Eliot's poem will involve a beautiful young woman—one who is both distressed and enigmatic. "La Figlia Che Piange" is also the title of a stele, or monumental tablet, that the poet had unsuccessfully searched for in an Italian museum. Overall, these references prepare readers for a speaker who imagines his personal life in literary or artistic terms—in other words, an aesthete type.

Lines 1-3 then introduce the speaker, who is giving directions to an initially unidentified person. These sound like directions one might give to an actor, or someone posing for a picture: "Stand on the highest pavement of the stair— / Lean on a garden urn." The first two instructions are straightforward enough, but the third is subtler and more metaphorical: "Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair." This seems to mean that the person being addressed should stand partly in the sun, so that light and shadow "weave" together in their hair.

Unsurprisingly, it turns out that the speaker is addressing a young woman, the "Figlia" of the title. As the following lines reveal, he's posing her in his *memory*. (Or in a *revised* memory, a kind of fantasy after the fact.) In other words, she's not there with him now, and he's addressing her via apostrophe.

The "stair," "garden urn," and "sunlight" are features of a remembered scene—in fact, a breakup scene. They have strong symbolic overtones:

- For example, the "stair" seems to elevate or exalt the girl as she stands "on the highest pavement" (top step).
- Gardens are traditionally associated with youth, love, freshness, and so on—but also with lost innocence (as in the Garden of Eden).
- Urns are associated with beauty and delicacy, but also with fragility and loss (funerary urns).

All of these resonances make sense in a poem about the speaker's ex: a girl he seems to miss and, in part, regret leaving. (For more on the symbolism of this setting, see the Symbols and Setting sections of this guide.)

Each of the first four lines is end-stopped with a dash, giving the passage an urgent, staccato quality. Meanwhile, the meter shifts around: it approximates, but doesn't settle into, iambic pentameter (five-beat lines that follow a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm). Line 2 has only three beats, for example ("Lean on a garden urn"). The poem ends up being an unstable mix of meter and free verse, which may reflect its speaker's ambivalence and unease. It's as if this speaker is having as much trouble committing to a rhythm as he had committing to a relationship.

LINES 4-7

Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

The speaker continues to instruct the young woman (his ex) in the second person. Again, it's as if he's stage-directing or posing her, trying to manage her every move. But as the next stanza reveals, she's not literally there with him. He's reliving their breakup, or recreating a version of it, in his memory. In the process, he's telling her how to react to being dumped!

First, he instructs her to clutch her "flowers"—presumably plucked from the garden—tightly to her body, with a look of "pained surprise." Then he tells her to "Fling [the flowers] to the ground," in anger and disgust, "and turn" away from him "With a fugitive resentment in [her] eyes." Again, the flowers seem symbolic: in flinging them aside, it's as if she's letting go of their love.

The word "fugitive" is also interesting here: as an adjective, it means "fleeting" or "elusive." It could simply refer to a bitter expression that briefly crosses her face: an anger she lets show, then quickly hides. But it could also imply that her unhappiness over the breakup is fleeting—that she's resentful but ready to move on.

The speaker then repeats: "[W]eave, weave the sunlight in your hair." This repeated instruction suggests that he's concerned with aesthetic effect above all. He wants to turn a painful memory into a beautiful picture (or into beautiful poetry). In the process, he seems to distance himself from her pain and humiliation. Is he simply callous, or is this his way of processing his own complex feelings? Either or both could be true! Regardless, there's a sad irony in his efforts to "direct" a moment that's long passed: whatever power he once had in this situation, it's only a memory now.

LINES 8-12

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,

So he would have left
As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
As the mind deserts the body it has used.

The start of the second stanza marks a shift in perspective. The present tense suddenly vanishes; the speaker is no longer instructing the young woman in his mind. Instead, he tacitly admits that everything in the previous stanza was a fantasy: an idealized version of an actual breakup.

Jarringly, he refers to himself in the third person ("he"), as though he were a separate character in this drama. This choice may be a kind of coping mechanism, a way of dissociating from his own heartbreak or distancing himself from his guilt over the breakup. The heavy repetition (including anaphora) in these lines conveys his agitation and preoccupation, as well as his fussy desire to get his words right:

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left
As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
As the mind deserts the body it has used.

Notice the slippery grammar, which seems to reflect the slipperiness of the speaker's own character: "So I would have had him leave [...] So he would have left." The conditional language ("would have") makes it hard to determine what, if anything, in the "garden" scene was real. At this point, readers might even wonder whether the breakup occurred at all (though the following stanza confirms that it did). The speaker himself is struggling for a firm grasp on the situation, turning it over and reframing it in his mind.

However, there are glimpses of a firm emotional reality underneath the layers of ambiguity and irony. The speaker's similes hint at his guilt and shame: he compares himself (or an *imagined version* of himself) to a "soul" leaving a "torn and bruised" body at the moment of death. He then reframes this idea in more secular terms, comparing himself to a "mind" that "deserts the body it has used." (Perhaps the religious word "soul" strikes him as overly lofty, and he revises it down a notch.) This is how he claims he *would* have left her if he could: like a ghostly presence exiting a "torn" and "used" shell of a person. In other words, he wishes he could have just ghosted her, leaving her standing in beautiful distress. But in claiming all this, he's accusing himself of callousness—even a kind of emotional violence. He feels that he used and hurt his lover, then tried to make a slick exit afterward (even if he failed to do so).

His avoidance of first-person pronouns is another sign of shame: he can't yet admit that he's talking about his *own* actions and intentions. His mind is still dissociating itself from a drama he was part of. And if this is how he *wishes* he'd left his ex—neatly and smoothly, in a beautiful garden scene—the actual breakup was almost certainly messier and uglier.

LINES 13-16

I should find
Some way incomparably light and deft,
Some way we both should understand,
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

In lines 13-16, the speaker continues to imagine his ideal breakup—by contrast with his *actual* breakup. Again, his repetition has an agitated, insistent quality to it:

I should find
Some way incomparably light and deft,
Some way we both should understand,
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

"Should" can mean both "ought to" and (in British English) "would," so the speaker might be saying what he *ought* to do now or what he *would* do if he could. Either way, there's an irony here (as the following stanza makes clear). He's now speaking in the present tense, as if he could still "find" the perfect exit from the relationship—but the relationship is over. The moment of the breakup has passed, and there's nothing more he can do to change it, except by reliving it and revising it in his imagination.

Moreover, the last line of the stanza suggests that he's being ironic, or sarcastic, at his own expense. In the previous lines, he imagined blithely floating free of his "griev[ing]" lover, like a pure "soul" or "mind" leaving a broken body. Now he imagines a scenario in which they "both" come together on the breakup, like two businesspeople sharing a "smile" and a facile "hand[shake]." This would be even better, he suggests: no muss, no fuss, no tears! (Even in this scenario, of course, he's *initiating* the breakup: "find[ing]" a "Simple," painless "way" to part.) But the word "faithless"—meaning disloyal or dishonest—gives the sarcasm away. He doesn't really believe people can break up with a glib handshake; he's mocking his own shiftiness and cowardice.

Notice how the enjambment after "find" places extra emphasis on the word (which also ends the shortest line in the poem). The word hangs in the air for a moment, as tentative as the speaker himself—who seems a little lost and unsure of what he's searching for.

LINES 17-20

She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.

Lines 17-20 shift to past tense, as the speaker finally narrates the reality of the breakup. He doesn't go into depth, but he does confirm one detail from the first stanza: the young woman

did, in fact, "turn[] away" from him. She also seems to have been holding an armful "of flowers" at the time, though this could be a memory from before the breakup.

Notice what's absent from this description: the "stair," the "garden urn," the "fugitive resentment in [her] eyes," and the "sunlight" woven "in her hair." It's unclear whether any of these picturesque details were authentic, or whether the speaker fantasized all of them. In any case, he now describes a much simpler, though still beautiful, image: "Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers." Simple as it is, the image haunted his memory: "Compelled my imagination many days, / Many days and many hours." He dwelled on the memory of his ex during "the autumn weather," a season of literal and symbolic decline. The triple repetition of "many" hints that the memory didn't pass with autumn, either: in fact, it haunts him still.

In this shifty, ambiguous poem, it's hard to pin down what's true and false about the couple's experience. Broadly, however, these lines seem to confirm that the speaker initiated the breakup, that she "turned away" as a result, and that their romance never recovered afterward.

LINES 21-24

> *And I wonder how they should have been together!*
> *I should have lost a gesture and a pose.*
> *Sometimes these cogitations still amaze*
> *The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.*

In the final lines, the speaker performs a kind of postmortem analysis of his failed relationship. Like many people after a breakup, he wonders what would have happened if he and his lover had stuck it out. Once again, however, he dissociates from the pain of it all by referring to *both* of them in the third person: "And I wonder how they should have been together!" It's as if using "we" would hurt too much now that the romance is gone.

Also like many people after a breakup, he tries to convince himself that it was for the best. If he'd stayed with his lover, he claims, "I should have lost a gesture and a pose." (Note that "should" here means "would," not "ought to," although the second meaning could be implied as well.) The words "gesture" and "pose" appear to be synecdoches: they point to some broader change in his personal style. Basically, he's claiming that his personality, or his art, would have turned out differently if not for the breakup. He would have "lost" the attitudes (or affectations) that define him, perhaps even sacrificed the kind of worldly wisdom that can only come from heartbreak. But once again, his language is sarcastically self-undermining. "A gesture and a pose" sounds superficial, if not completely phony. The breakup may have helped him become a more sophisticated person or successful artist, but it cost him some integrity, too.

In the last two lines, the speaker confesses that he still thinks about his ex and his breakup. (Only "Sometimes," of course!) His language is just shy of self-parody:

> Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
> The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

This is a complex, lofty, poetic way of saying: *I still think about her sometimes, in the middle of the day or night*. The pompous language—"cogitations" instead of "thoughts," "the noon's repose" rather than "lunch break," etc.—again suggests that the speaker is intellectualizing his pain. Yet the words "amaze" and "troubled" give a sense of his true feelings. He's still troubled by the way he left this girl, still obsessed with their relationship and what might have been. No matter how he tries to dramatize or detach himself from his loss, the sadness of it still strikes him with "amaz[ing]" force.

SYMBOLS

THE URN

Urns, or decorative vases, are symbolically associated with beauty and fragility—they're highly breakable, after all. Since funerary urns are used to hold cremated remains, urns can also be associated with death. Finally, thanks to John Keats's famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), they're often associated with poetry, as well as with the particular themes of that poem (including unfulfilled love and the link between truth and beauty).

All of these associations could be read into the "garden urn" here. The speaker is imagining his ex, a beautiful young woman, leaning on an urn at a moment of great vulnerability. In fact, it's the moment he broke up with her, so it represents the death of their love. He's trying to reimagine the breakup in the most aesthetically pleasing way possible, as if turning it into an image worthy of poetry. But the following stanza ("So I would have had her stand and grieve") implies that this beautiful vision is a fiction. In other words, despite what Keats wrote, beauty and truth aren't so synonymous after all.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Lean on a garden urn—"

GARDEN/FLOWERS

Flowers are traditional symbols of love, youth, femininity, and innocence. The poem plays on all of these associations. It features a young woman who, as her lover breaks up with her, "Fling[s]" away the flowers she's holding. Symbolically, this gesture suggests that she's losing love, losing innocence, and growing up (however painfully), all in the same moment. At least, that's the way the speaker imagines the scene! Either way, he remembers her with "her arms full of flowers" before their parting: a nostalgic image of youthful

beauty.

Meanwhile, the breakup takes place in a garden—presumably the source of the girl's flowers. There's probably a little biblical symbolism here: after all, the Garden of Eden was a lovers' paradise for Adam and Eve until they, too, lost their innocence. (The girl feels "pained surprise" at the speaker's "faithless" betrayal, so if she's a kind of Eve figure, he's arguably more like the serpent than Adam! But the breakup appears to have been painful and formative for him, too.) The "autumn weather" (line 17), traditionally symbolic of decline, reinforces the idea that this couple has experienced a *fall* from grace.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Lean on a garden urn—"
- **Line 4:** "Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—"
- **Line 20:** "Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers."

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The poem begins with an apostrophe to the speaker's ex, the girl or "Figlia" referred to in the title. It's not immediately clear that she's absent; at first, it seems as though she and the speaker might be in a "garden" together. By the second stanza, however, it's clear that she's long gone, and the speaker is essentially talking to a memory.

It's a strange kind of apostrophe, too: rather than pouring his heart out to the girl, he's giving her instructions. It sounds almost as if he's stage-directing her, or posing her for a picture: "Stand on the highest pavement of the stair," "Lean on a garden urn," etc. He's remembering her, and their breakup, in the way he prefers—making it a prettier scene, or at least one he can live with. The only hint of his underlying passion comes in the repetition of "Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair."

Finally, "Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair" (repeated twice in the first stanza) is a visual metaphor. It describes a delicate play of light and shadow in the girl's hair, such that the two seem woven together. It's a lovely, subtle image that conveys how the speaker wants to remember her: beautiful and perfectly posed.

Even more unusual is the way the apostrophe ends after the first stanza. The speaker shifts to critiquing his breakup, alternately referring to himself in the third and first person as he does so. It's as if he's switching psychological tactics while coming to grips with a painful event. Meanwhile, he shifts from addressing his ex in the second person to recalling her in the third. This change makes her seem all the more distant, underscoring the fact that their romance is truly over.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-7:** "Stand on the highest pavement of the stair— / Lean on a garden urn— / Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair— / Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise— / Fling them to the ground and turn / With a fugitive resentment in your eyes: / But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair."

REPETITION

The poem is full of repetition and parallelism. Some of these repetitions involve thematically important words, such as "turn"/"turned" and "leave"/"left" (verbs related to the couple's breakup). Others involve whole phrases, notably "Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair" (lines 3 and 7)—an instruction the speaker repeats to the *memory* of his lover, as if desperately hoping to create or cling to the perfect image of her. This repeated phrase itself also contains epizeuxis, that "weave, weave" making the speaker sound yet more desperate.

Other repetitions evoke the obsessive pattern of the speaker's thoughts, the way he's constantly revising his memories and ideas. Look at the second stanza, for example:

> So I would have had him leave,
> So I would have had her stand and grieve,
> So he would have left
> As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
> As the mind deserts the body it has used.
> I should find
> Some way incomparably light and deft,
> Some way we both should understand,
> Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

Until the last line, nearly every phrase is repeated in some way, often through anaphora (note how many lines begin with "So I would have," "As the," or "Some way"). The rhythm of the passage is fussy, almost stuttering—as if the speaker is constantly starting over, clarifying, and correcting himself (e.g., switching in the secular "mind" for the religious "soul"). These effects make him sound like a fastidious artist—*and* a heartsick lover who can't stop thinking about his ex.

The epizeuxis and diacope of lines 18-19 also make the speaker sound obsessive:

> Compelled my imagination many days,
> Many days and many hours:

The repetition emphasizes just how much time—how "many" days and hours—the speaker has spent thinking about his ex.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “on”
- **Line 2:** “on”
- **Line 3:** “Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair”
- **Line 4:** “flowers”
- **Line 5:** “turn”
- **Line 7:** “weave, weave the sunlight in your hair”
- **Line 8:** “So I would have had,” “leave”
- **Line 9:** “So I would have had”
- **Line 10:** “So,” “would have,” “left”
- **Line 11:** “As the,” “leaves,” “the body”
- **Line 12:** “As the,” “the body”
- **Line 14:** “Some way”
- **Line 15:** “Some way”
- **Line 17:** “turned”
- **Line 18:** “many days”
- **Line 19:** “Many days,” “many”
- **Line 20:** “hair,” “her arms,” “her arms,” “flowers”
- **Line 21:** “should have”
- **Line 22:** “should have”

SIMILE

The poem contains several vivid similes and metaphors. In particular, three similes in the second stanza provide a rich sense of the speaker's psychology. The first two come in lines 10-12:

> So he would have left
> As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
> As the mind deserts the body it has used.

The speaker imagines leaving his lover the way the soul, according to some religious believers, leaves the body at the moment of death. "Torn and bruised" makes this an especially disturbing comparison: the speaker imagines his departure as a violent act, one that would leave the girl as wounded and depleted as a corpse.

He then revises the comparison slightly: he "would have left" her "As the mind deserts the body it has used." This is a more secular framing—a "faithless" framing, to borrow the language of line 16—but it's still an image of "desert[ion]" and disloyalty. In this scenario, the girl he's left still feels abandoned and "used."

Meanwhile, minds and souls are ghostly things that can transition smoothly from the concrete to the abstract or from life to the afterlife. In other words, the speaker is envisioning a slick getaway that leaves *her* devastated, but doesn't affect *him* much. Building on this idea, he imagines a breakup that's perfectly smooth on both sides:

> I should find
> Some way incomparably light and deft,
> Some way we both should understand,
> Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

Basically, he wishes breaking up were as easy and glib as a handshake between businesspeople. In this scenario, he's still the one ending the relationship—"I should find" this approach, he says—but his lover is happy to play along and conceal her pain.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** “So he would have left / As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised, / As the mind deserts the body it has used.”
- **Lines 13-16:** “I should find / Some way incomparably light and deft, / Some way we both should understand, / Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.”

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains relatively few enjambments, but all of them pack a punch. Generally, they have the effect of emphasizing the word just before (or just after) the line break. Look at the only enjambment in the first stanza, for example:

> Fling them to the ground and turn
> With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:

The enjambment (and the fact that it's the *first* enjambment, after four end-stopped lines) places extra weight on "turn," making the girl's gesture seem more forceful and dramatic. (The enjambment also subtly enacts what the poem describes, the line abruptly *turning* toward the next.) Something similar happens with "left" in line 10: this time, it's the speaker's departure that seems sudden and forceful (even violent, as the simile in lines 10-11 suggests). And the poem's final enjambment, in lines 23-24, accentuates the key word "amaze":

> Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
> The troubled midnight and the noon’s repose.

This effect stresses the power with which these thoughts ("cogitations") strike the speaker. In lines 17-18, the enjambment draws more attention to the word just after the line break ("Compelled"), but the point is much the same: the memory of this girl (and this romance) is *compelling*, *amazing*, haunting.

Finally, the enjambment in lines 13-14 ("I should find / Some way") highlights the shortest line in the poem, which is also the one line in the poem that doesn't rhyme. (Although "find" rhymes internally with "mind" in line 12.) Why so much emphasis on this line? Grammatically, it's a transitional moment, as it wrenches the speaker from the past or the conditional/counterfactual ("I would have had") back into the present tense.

The extra weight on "find" stresses that he's *still* searching, still seeking resolution: in an important sense, the breakup isn't over for him yet.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "turn / With"
- **Lines 10-11:** "left / As"
- **Lines 13-14:** "find / Some"
- **Lines 17-18:** "weather / Compelled"
- **Lines 23-24:** "amaze / The"

IRONY

Like many of T. S. Eliot's poems, this one contains strong undertones of irony. In general, the irony here seems self-aware and aimed inward: in a complex way, the speaker is mocking himself.

The first irony is that the speaker is mentally "directing" a woman whom he broke up with a while ago ("Stand on the highest pavement," etc.). In the first stanza, it appears as though she might actually be present: that she and the speaker are together in the "garden." But the second stanza makes clear that lines 1-7 were an apostrophe to an absent person, and also a kind of fantasy about an ideal breakup. There's an ironic reversal of the reader's expectations here, as well as an ironic conflict between the speaker's desires and the reality of the situation. Mentally, he still wants to control an event that has already passed, and so can't possibly be controlled anymore.

Still, on some level, he's aware of the futility. First, he acknowledges the fantasy as such—as something he "would have had" happen, not something that *did* happen. Then, as though he could still "find" that perfect exit, he imagines a breakup that "we both should understand, / Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand." This phrasing acknowledges that his supposedly ideal breakup would in fact be glib, superficial, and rather cowardly. ("Faithless" here implies disloyalty or treachery.) So lines 13-16 are an instance of verbal irony, or sarcasm: the speaker knows that a fake-cheerful, businesslike handshake wouldn't really be the best "way" to leave a lover. Through his sarcasm, he's accusing himself of faint-heartedness and false-heartedness. Moreover, he purports to want a gentler breakup, but then says that such a breakup would be shallow and faithless, so there's an ironic conflict here between intention (less pain) and reality (less truth).

Finally, while he claims that something good came out of the breakup, he calls the thing he gained "a gesture and a pose." He's suggesting that the failed romance benefited his art—shaped his attitudes and gave him material to write about. But even this claim is self-mocking: he didn't gain deep insight, just a superficial "gesture" and an artificial "pose." Meanwhile, he still thinks about the girl he gave up—in the middle of the night, for example, and in his daydreams. By confessing that he's still "troubled" by her memory, he immediately and ironically undermines his own suggestion that the breakup was for the best. There's also a bit of ironic understatement in his claim that "cogitations" about her still trouble him "Sometimes": this is a dry way of saying that he misses her a lot and still feels terrible about how things ended.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Lines 13-16
- Line 22
- Lines 23-24

VOCABULARY

Pavement (Line 1) - Any paved surface; here, the paved top step of a staircase.

Urn (Line 2) - An ornamental vase (here, a large vase on display in a garden).

Fugitive (Line 6) - Fleeting or elusive.

Incomparably (Line 14) - Exceptionally; beyond compare.

Faithless (Line 16) - Disloyal; deceitful.

Compelled (Line 18) - Captured; captivated.

Pose (Line 22) - Can be read literally (to mean a way of holding one's body, as in a portrait), but also suggests a metaphorical stance, attitude, or affectation (for example, that of an artist).

Cogitations (Line 23) - A fancy word for "thoughts."

Amaze (Line 23) - Astonish, stun, or bewilder.

Repose (Line 24) - A state of rest or relaxation. ("The noon's repose" implies a midday break from work.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem has a very musical, but flexible, form. It contains three stanzas of differing length (seven, nine, and eight lines, respectively) and employs a shifting meter and rhyme scheme. It begins and ends with iambic pentameter (five-beat lines that generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm), but the rhythm varies considerably in between, and each stanza rhymes in a different pattern. Uniquely, line 13 has no matching end rhyme, though it forms an internal rhyme with the line before ("mind"/"find").

This form is loose enough that Eliot's contemporaries would have understood it as free verse. To a contemporary ear, it may sound more like a metrical poem with creative variations. Eliot

himself was ornery about these categories: he famously claimed that "No verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job." However, in this phase of his career, he was consciously adapting some of the *vers libre* (free verse) techniques of late 19th-century French poetry into early 20th-century English poetry.

The experimental form of "La Figlia Che Piange" isn't just a technical exercise: it also has psychological overtones. The shifting structure highlights the speaker's own inconsistency, or internal conflict, as he reimagines his breakup scene. It parallels his fussy shifts in narrative perspective and grammatical tense. It makes him sound fitful and agitated, and perhaps a bit slippery—as if he doesn't want to be pinned down to one version of events.

METER

"La Figlia Che Piange" has a fluid, shifting meter. It begins and ends with iambic pentameter—lines that contain five stressed syllables and generally flow in an unstressed-stressed rhythm (da-DUM, da-DUM,da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM). Readers can hear this pattern, with small variations, in line 1 and lines 22-24:

> Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—
> [...]
> I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
> Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
> The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

Lines 1 and 23 begin with a trochee (DA-dum) rather than an iamb (da-DUM): "Stand on," "Sometimes." But this is an extremely common variation. In general, all these lines are thoroughly conventional iambic pentameter (which is itself the most common meter in English poetry).

What comes in between is much less conventional. The poem contains lines with only two or three stressed syllables: "I should find," "Lean on a garden urn" (lines 13 and 2). It also contains longer, metrically irregular lines, such as line 16: "Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand." The shifty meter helps convey the speaker's doubt, ambivalence, and desire to revise his words and actions.

Eliot wrote this poem at a time when he, and fellow modernists, were adapting the techniques of French *vers libre* (free verse) into English poetry. His peers would have read the poem as free verse, and it's certainly much looser than the rigid forms of the 18th and 19th centuries. At the same time, it's strongly informed by Eliot's metrical expertise and never strays *that* far from the pentameter.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's rhyme scheme is irregular and varies from stanza to stanza. The full scheme looks like this:

ABACBCA DDEFFGEHH IJKKILJL

Look carefully and one will notice that there's only one unrhymed line: line 13 ("I should find"). The word "find" here forms an internal rhyme with "mind" in the previous line, but it has no matching end rhyme. Its uniqueness helps mark it as a transitional line, as the speaker shifts from the past tense (or the conditional perfect mode: "would have had") to the present ("I should find").

Like the poem's shifting meter and stanza pattern, the flexible rhyme scheme gives the speaker's thoughts a relatively natural flow. It reflects T. S. Eliot's experimental, modernist approach to poetic form, and it also reflects the character of the speaker—who himself is a little shifty and hard to pin down.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a somewhat slippery figure. As he reflects on his breakup with his lover (the "you" or "her" of the poem), he shifts between past and present tense and between first, second, and third person.

In the first stanza, he apostrophizes his lover while recreating the breakup (or a more satisfying version of it) in his memory. He addresses her almost as a stage director, managing her every movement: "Stand [...] Lean [...] Weave." (Of course, she can't literally hear him, nor would she be likely to follow his directions if she could!) In the second stanza, he calls the two of them "him" and "her," as if trying to detach himself emotionally from the breakup. He then shifts to a more natural-sounding first person ("I should find [...] Some way we both should understand," "She [...] Compelled my imagination," etc.), but continues to shift tenses and wrestle with his feelings.

These devices can be confusing on a first reading of the poem, but they make a certain kind of emotional sense. The speaker comes off as a fastidious, neurotic aesthete: a man struggling to gain some artistic or poetic perspective on a painful event. His pronoun shifts help dramatize his internal conflict as he turns the breakup over in his memory. The grammatical shiftiness also suggests that *he's* a little shifty: someone who'd prefer a "light and deft," insincere breakup to a candid one.

T. S. Eliot's poems often feature conflicted or self-divided speakers. For example, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (from the same book as "La Figlia Che Piange") famously begins with the speaker, Prufrock, talking to himself as though he were two different people: "Let us go, then, you and I."

SETTING

The poem's main setting is a "garden," which contains "flowers," a "stair[case]," and a large "urn" (vase). This is the scene of the couple's breakup, at least as the speaker fantasizes it. He

implies that his mind is rearranging the details, but the memory seems to have *some* underlying reality: he affirms in the final stanza that the woman "turned away" from him, apparently with "her arms full of flowers."

The breakup happened during, or maybe just before, the "autumn weather": a time of symbolic decline. But the speaker continues to recall the event long afterward, including in the middle of the day and night (during "The troubled midnight and the noon's repose"). In other words, the emotional impact of the event wasn't confined to a single place or season.

The garden setting, whether real or imagined, carries some symbolic and allusive overtones as well. Like the biblical Garden of Eden, it's a place where one or both lovers lose some form of innocence (the girl's "pained surprise" suggests her shock at having her heart broken).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) published "La Figlia Che Piange" as the final poem in his first collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). The collection's famous title poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," shares some features and themes with "La Figlia Che Piange"; the speakers of both poems seem divided against themselves, for example, and brood on their romantic hesitations and regrets.

"La Figlia Che Piange" appeared during a period of widespread literary experimentation, known as modernism. Modernist writers such as Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf challenged the literary norms they had inherited from the 19th century. These norms were both formal—related to the structure and style of poems, plays, and novels—and social: sex, drugs and alcohol, feminism, and working-class life all became new subjects for serious literature during this period. Eliot's models at this time were mainly French poets of the late 19th century, such as Jules Laforgue and Stéphane Mallarmé. He experimented skillfully with the emerging techniques of *vers libre* (English: free verse); "La Figlia Che Piange," for instance, hovers around iambic pentameter, but doesn't follow that meter consistently until the last few lines.

The poem's title—Italian for "The Girl Who Weeps" or "The Weeping Girl"—alludes to a stele (stone monument) that Eliot hoped to see, but was unable to find, on a trip to Italy. The epigraph is a quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the central epic poem in the Latin language. Spoken by the hero Aeneas to Venus, goddess of love, while the goddess is in disguise, it translates roughly to: "Oh, maiden, by what name shall I call you?" These allusions create an air of elusiveness or mystery around the young woman in the poem, as well as an atmosphere of uncertainty around the lovers' parting. The phrase "the weeping girl" also stresses how much the breakup hurt this woman. (Eliot's own love life was notoriously conflicted; scholars are still discovering new details about the romantic turmoil he experienced—and caused.)

Eliot's influence on Western literary culture was immense. Poems like "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets" cast a long shadow over 20th-century writing, and Eliot was regarded as the premier literary critic and tastemaker of his era. His achievements won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early 20th century was a time of profound change. Inventions such as the airplane and telephone altered daily life significantly in a short time. Cities grew denser as people began flocking from the countryside to urban centers. New technologies and industries improved the quality of life for some, while creating polluted environments and unsafe working conditions for others.

When poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations* were first printed, World War I had just begun. The immense violence of the "Great War" shook ideals inherited from the previous century and shattered the old European order. The new technologies that had seemingly improved life for so many were used to kill on an industrial scale. All these developments made modernist artists deeply skeptical of the modern world. At the same time, modernist thinking stirred up animosity towards older ways of living; after all, it was the old European empires that had led the continent into war.

Many modernists, including Eliot, also wrestled with the problem of belief in an age of mass death and declining religious affiliation. While "La Figlia Che Piange" is more concerned with love problems, a hint of this conflict is visible in the speaker's self-accusing word "faithless" (line 16), as well as his revision from the religious "soul" to the secular "mind" (lines 11-12).

As an American poet who had just resettled in England, and who would spend most of his life in Europe, Eliot sought novel ways of depicting and addressing his increasingly globalized society. His poems incorporate a wide range of languages and literary traditions, as in the title and epigraph here.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — A short biography of Eliot at The Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/t-s-eliot)
- An Introduction to Modernism — A Poetry Foundation feature on the movement Eliot helped define. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/

an-introduction-to-modernism)

- The Poet's Love Life — An article about the complex romantic relationships that inspired Eliot's poems. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-secret-history-of-t-s-eliots-muse)
- An Original Printing — See the poem as it originally appeared in Prufrock and Other Observations (1917). (https://archive.org/details/prufrockandother00eliorich/page/38/mode/2up)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to T. S. Eliot read "La Figlia Che Piange." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9Wvp5AiIX8)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER T. S. ELIOT POEMS

- Journey of the Magi
- Morning at the Window
- Portrait of a Lady
- Preludes
- Rhapsody on a Windy Night
- The Hollow Men
- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
- The Waste Land

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*La Figlia Che Piange.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Oct 2022. Web. 8 Feb 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*La Figlia Che Piange.*" LitCharts LLC, October 3, 2022. Retrieved February 8, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/t-s-eliot/la-figlia-che-piange.